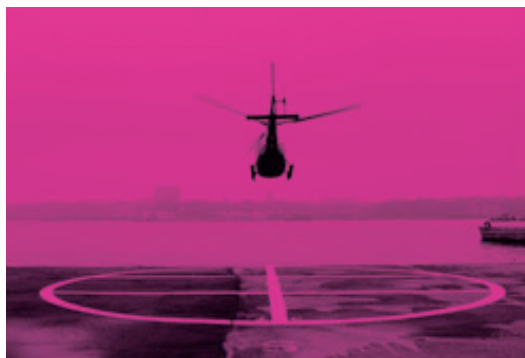


## Story Telling

Matthew Buckingham's films, photographs and installations explore the present by examining representations of – and subjects from – the past

by *Melissa Gronlund*



Matthew Buckingham is a deep-time cartographer, drawing a tissued map of itineraries travelled by different people at different times: the Hudson River in New York, Route 124 in New England, the Daniel Boone Expressway in Missouri and the streets of Liverpool, Vienna and New York. All become layered palimpsests of the journeys of people whose stories are now largely forgotten. 'One way to look at how we define the present is [to consider] how we edit or construct the relationship with the past – what's important enough to be included or excluded,' the Brooklyn-based artist said recently. His complex film and video installations recoup these lost narratives, immersing the viewer in the history that Buckingham makes present in the space between the projector and the projected image.

Buckingham has been working in film since the late 1980s, when he arrived in New York from the University of Iowa's influential part film-studies, part film-practice programme – one of the first of its kind to be established in the United States. 'I was interested in applying the questions of identity representation that were in the air in the late 1980s and early 1990s to non-fiction filmmaking,' he says, and his practice has retained the engaged spirit of that period. In works such as the film *Situation Leading to a Story* (1999), the looped slide projection *Traffic Report* (2005) and the video *Obscure Moorings* (2006) Buckingham addresses, respectively, American financial control of Peru's natural resources from the 1920s to the 1970s, the razing of a black neighbourhood to make room for a motorway named after the folk hero Daniel Boone, and the displacement of Liverpool dockworkers. His films bring a clinical, conspicuously objective gaze to their subjects: static, wide-angle shots of cityscapes that seem like still tableaux until a bird flits by; slow pans that continue at their even pace whatever action or non-action they record. In installations such as *Traffic Report*, slides tick by as though controlled by mechanical professors. Buckingham often delivers his works' voice-overs himself, in the neutral accent of the American Midwest that newscasters from other parts of the country train themselves to acquire.

Although he made films for the cinema early in his career, Buckingham sees the movie theatre – a 'placeless space' – as lacking and lays stress on the social and political valences that inhere in the sites he creates with his projections. 'The desire of the cinema space is to make you forget about where you are and what's going on around you,' he says. 'My desire is to disrupt all that.'<sup>3</sup> After 11 September 2001 he began considering how, as an artist working with the moving image, he could make public art, particularly a piece about New York. The result was the 16mm film *Muhheakantuck – Everything has a Name* (2004). Shot from a helicopter moving slowly overhead, *Muhheakantuck* travels along the banks of the Hudson River, which runs along the west side of Manhattan. A pink colour filter denaturalizes the

image and makes it look something like decayed Technicolor film stock – a warped and grainy purple pink. Working in time with the measured pace of the film, Buckingham's voice-over calmly describes the violent settlement of the region: the wholesale swindling, murder and exploitation of the Lenape, the area's predominant indigenous people, at the hands of the Dutch and English settlers. Near the end of the journey Buckingham declares: 'spaces that have been abstracted once more become particular places'. Buckingham's original plan for *Muhheakantuck*, which he still hopes to realize, was to project the film on a boat moving up the river thus locating the spectator at the site of three historical events: that of the Lenape's suppression, that of the making of the film and that of the viewing.

This differentiation between the historical time represented and the later time when the history was written is central to Buckingham's practice. History, he explains, 'is only a methodology. It never escapes historiography'. The writing of history, or historiography, was established as a professional discipline in Germany in the 1800s, taking Leopold von Ranke's injunction to represent the past 'as it actually happened' as its working principle. Modern history distinguished itself from medieval annals and chronicles (chronological records of what happened each year or during particular events) by imparting narrative structure to historical accounts – telling them less like a date-book or diary and more like a story. In the 1960s French Structuralists and, later, Post-Structuralists labelled conventional historical narratives as instruments of ideology, while Anglo-American analytic philosophers constructed a case for narrative's suitability to historiography – setting out what the philosopher Hayden White calls the 'epistemic status of narrativity'.<sup>4</sup> These concerns have, for obvious reasons, been also relevant to non-fiction and historical documentary film in their attempts to represent the past.

Foremost among the problems in documentary – and one Buckingham directly addresses – is its claim to simultaneously present and historicize events. In *Analytical Philosophy of History* (1965), an important work comparing the structure of historical narrative to that of narrative sentences, Arthur Danto invents the category of the 'Ideal Chronicler' in order to show that history can only be written retrospectively – and that the gap between actual historical agents and later historians is therefore inevitable. He suggests that even if there were an Ideal Chronicler who had perfect knowledge of all events, combined with the means to set them down in writing as they happened, the Chronicler would not be able to record these occurrences in the meaningful way we demand of history. The significance of an incident only appears afterwards, given to it by the events that follow. Danto recognizes that no historian at the start of the Thirty Years' War would have been able to write, 'The Thirty Years' War began in 1618'. The Ideal Chronicler is a useful model for understanding the paradox of historical documentaries and TV newscasts, which attempt, despite the logical impossibility, to make sense of history as it happens. Buckingham shows the disavowal involved in this: he seeks to represent history while also representing historiography.

In his current show at the Camden Arts Centre in London, curated by the art historian Mark Godfrey, Buckingham addresses the conventions of biography in his work *The Spirit and the Letter* (2007) by using the 18th-century author Mary Wollstonecraft as a subject. Buckingham's interest in Wollstonecraft comes from precisely this question of meaning conferred after the fact versus meaning understood at the time. He dissects the contemporary reading of Wollstonecraft – as a 'woman ahead of her time' or a 'pioneering feminist' – to show what it implies about how significance is accrued. Buckingham's installation stages what he calls a 'ghost encounter' between the viewer and Wollstonecraft. The project is a generous one – the extent of Wollstonecraft's accomplishments is much greater when we think of her writing *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* in 1792 than if we imagine her writing it now.

Although Buckingham's philosophy is cool, his tastes run to the Gothic: the trope of the ghost, explicit here, underlies his idea of geography steeped with memory. Amos Fortune, a slave who bought his freedom in 1770 but whose remarkable story has been left out of the history of his New Hampshire town, haunts Route 124 in the film *Amos Fortune Road* (1996); the Lenape roam the Hudson River Valley in *Muhheakantuck*. This emphasis on the continuity contained within a site – the idea that some kind of memory of Native American tragedies remains, almost as an indexical trace, by the Hudson – goes to the heart of our general belief in the presentness of history. This is why we visit battlefields, erect monuments in situ and

place flowers at the sites of road accidents. Tacita Dean and W. G. Sebald have mined this territory, as has Joachim Koester, with whom Buckingham has collaborated in the past (the two had a show together last summer at the Lund Konsthall). Buckingham exploits the persistence of meaning through time and space to give his work its emotional traction. His films prompt a shudder of disclosure: these things were happening right here, as we go idly by.

For *A Man of the Crowd* (2003) Buckingham dramatized the eponymous 1840 Edgar Allan Poe story. The 16mm film installation transfers Poe's story to the streets of 19th-century Vienna, where a young man trails a mysterious figure – whose expensive clothes are filthy and ragged, and who carries both a diamond and a dagger – through the city, hoping, by sustained observation, to pin down his peculiar character. The young man fails: the man has no personality of his own; he is a face in the crowd and can only exist among others. Buckingham's chiaroscuro ramblings through Vienna retain the unease of this paranormal but evocative conclusion. Buckingham traces a parallel between the pair's route through the streets and the structure of Poe's narrative, translating the story's words into the camera's circuit. The film is projected life-size in the gallery space, with a double-reflecting pane of glass placed in front of it: anywhere the viewer stands casts a shadow onto the film and becomes, literally, the third man in the game of chase. The reader and viewer follow the young man, who in turn follows the strange man; everyone is linked in a chain of desire to know the other. Played on a 20-minute loop, *A Man of the Crowd* forestalls any narrative closure; instead the installation stages the endless cycling of a voyeuristic, hungry gaze – depicting the young man not as some disaffected flâneur but as one whose quest verges on the pathological.

Buckingham's work picks up on the unseemliness of our craving to know the past, which he balances with the pathos of the attempt's unavoidable failure (a failure shared by history too). One of Buckingham's most accomplished films, *Situation Leading to a Story* (1999), was begun by chance. Returning home from the Waverly cinema in Greenwich Village one night, he came across a discarded box containing four reels of 16mm film, marked respectively 'garden', 'Peru', 'garage' and 'Guadalajara'. A label on the box read 'Harrison M. Dennis, 52 Underhill Road, Ossining, New York'. Buckingham took them home and screened them. The first film shows a well-to-do family in the shady garden of an estate in the 1920s: the women chat while the men play lawn games in white summer suits and plus-fours. The next reel shows the building of a CPC copper mine in Peru; the third the construction of a garage; and the final one a bullfight in Guadalajara, Mexico.

Using the films as found objects, much like Sebald uses photographs in his memoirs, Buckingham accompanies them with the story of his discovery of the boxes and his attempt to solve the mysteries of how they are related and why they were thrown out, by re-connecting the glimpses they show of the past to what might persist in the present. Like the young man in *A Man of the Crowd*, Buckingham fails. He drives to 52 Underhill Road in Ossining, but the house in the film is no longer standing; he finds Harrison Dennis in an outdated Manhattan phone book, but Dennis professes not to remember throwing out the films and hangs up before Buckingham can ask what they contained. The stories the films tell remain adrift, replaced, now, with Buckingham's tentative speculations and his own narrative of events. All that remains of the family of Underhill Road are their spectral appearances, shooting phantom bows and arrows on a gallery wall. 'I was thinking about what happens to images when they're shifted from one context to another', he says. 'They keep producing meaning, whether they're asked to or not.'

Melissa Gronlund is a writer and projects editor of *ArtReview*.

1 Phone conversation with the author, January 2007

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.

4 Hayden White, 'Narrative in Contemporary Historical Theory', *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1990, p. 31